

I pull into the car dismissal line just in the nick of time. I like to be late, so I don't have to wait. I pull up behind the stragglers, and my kiddo opens the door and slides next to me.

"How was your day, baby?"

"Pretty good."

"Any homework?"

"Current event."

Ugh. Bummer. I flip the blinker on to turn left out of the school parking lot.

"Mama."

"Yeah," I turn the wheel and ease into the traffic.

"If we're driving and they shoot me, just keep driving."

I try not to slam on the brakes. I look at the swamp on one side and the minivan pulling up on the other.

"What now, Bud?"

"If they shoot me and we're driving. I don't want you to stop."

Is this about road rage or the Pawtucket hockey shoot up? Is it about Renee Good or Alex Pretti? He has to do a current event and American gun violence is new and fresh every week.

"If *who* shoots you?" I say.

We drive up the hill as an excavator wrenches a chunk of earth into the air. They're tearing up the hillside for condos or office buildings or...something.

"Anybody," he says.

"Anybody?" I pause as we round the corner toward home. I have to be comforting. I tap my fingers on the wheel. Then, "Well, no one's going to shoot you because I'll kill them first."

This is violent, I know. It's not very nice, but let's be real. I've imagined myself as a bullet absorber for my boy since he opened his eyes. He was born two years after Sandy Hook and was eight when Uvalde happened. I want to be gentle and kind and say something like "that's not gonna happen sweetie. Everything is sunshine and rainbows. Count your blessings and the world is your oyster and go and seek your dreams." – Or some shit. But I don't. It's just practical. "I'll kill them. First."

"Huh?" he says. Maybe he's moving on to something else, but now I'm locked in. I want him to know he is safe.

“No one will shoot you because they will be dead.”

Truth is, I grew up on Rainbow Bright and Care Bear cheer. We’re far from there now. At some point Rainbow Bright got a mech suit. I count the weapons, meager as they are, within my reach. Throwing knives in my side door. Pepper spray in my purse. A dozen rocks in the trunk. Windshield scraper behind my seat. And of course, my car is a tank. For my kid? I’d gladly leave tread marks on some violent guy’s chest.

“They’ll be dead, love.”

Road rage or gun violence. Current event. Whatever he’s referring to I don’t know. I’m just trying to be comforting.

--From *Neurotic in New England*